Autumn Stewart

Fox

W400

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Lack of Potential

My hair twisted in and out of the opened window of my sister’s 1974 Baja Bug. It whipped and curled throughout the cab, tangling like some of the cacti spread along the desert surrounding us. My hand tried to calm the storm of brown around our faces, but to no avail. It may have been easier to do had I been able to use both hands, but my left hand clutched a short stack of paper.

“What’s that?” my sister asked, looking down to my lap.

“It’s a story,” I replied. “I had to write it for class today.”

“Oh, wow,” she rolled her eyes, “someone did their homework.”

“Sometimes…”

Laughing, she lodged her foot to the door and balanced the wheel with her knee as she put a pipe to her lips. With the other hand she flicked a lighter. Once. Twice. Three times. The amusement that was in her face a second ago viciously switched after the unsuccessful attempts at lighting her Bic.

“Damn it, Autumn! Roll your fucking window up already.”

I pushed aside all the hair that I could and cranked the handle, lifting the old pane an inch at a time. My sister, satisfied, sparked the lighter once more. This time with a flame blazing she inhaled the sweet smoke, prepping herself for another day at Queen Creek High. She passed the pipe to me. I set my papers down on the floorboard, protecting them with the toe of my shoe, and hit the pipe deeply. A long band of smoke filled my lungs as I gave the pipe back. Turning my head to the window and cranking the handle once more I filled the cab with a rush of hot air. I exhaled slowly and the smoke wisped away into the desert.

A light-headed feeling swam from my chest into my head, Ace of Base pounded from the cheap tape deck through terrible speakers, and I could feel the rumble of flame getting ready to spew—as it often did—out of three foot tailpipe that protruded from the back of the bug. People thought we were peculiar to say the least, but we were in our element. The expanse of desert that surrounded us seemed to absorb our noise. I didn’t mind being muffled as I gazed lazily into an endless void. It always somehow comforted me. I could feel my high between muddled thoughts that climbed in and out of my head. Scanning the desert floor, I realized why I liked it so much. I could connect with the scenery, it reminded me of myself: empty and lifeless.

After ten more miles and ten more hits on the pipe we arrived at school. My sister and I looked at each other with bloodshot eyes.

“Ready?” she asked me.

“Not really,” I said, “I hate this damn place.”

“Well,” her mischievous glance gave her next thought away, “we could go find the guys and say fuck-it.”

I knew that I hated math. And gym. And science. And social studies. And all the students at this place who gave me sideways glances or snickers in the classroom, and the teachers who told my parents I would surmount to nothing in this world, and the principle who just suspended me two weeks ago for punching a girl because she told on me for smoking a cigarette in the bathroom. I didn’t want to go in there. I didn’t want to deal with it anymore. I didn’t give a shit.

“Deal,” I said.

We opened our doors.

Walking side by side we entered the grassy quad at the center of school. There at a picnic table sat my sister’s boyfriend and his brother, neither of them looked excited to be there.

“We are going to leave,” my sister announced.

“Cool,” her boyfriend agreed. “Let’s get out of here before the first bell.”

We got back to the car and I realized that my paper was still on the floorboard.

“Hang on,” I said, “I want to drop this off.”

My sister looked at me like I was insane. I knew what she was thinking: *Why the hell would you do that?* I knew it was stupid, I might get caught and be forced to stay on the campus, but I wanted to turn this in. I actually stayed up late and worked on this story for some time. I thought it was better than anything I had ever done before. I wanted my teacher to read it. I needed her to read it. I ran back to the school, papers in hand, and went to my English classroom. There wasn’t a class first period, so I slipped my stack under the door, hoping not to stir Ms. Robinson from her desk. I turned and ran back to the car.

“You,” my sister said, “are stupid. Why’d you go off and do that, huh? Was it that fucking important?”

“Yes,” I said, not looking at her.

“Turning into a goody-fucking-two-shoes.”

She rolled her eyes and put the car into first gear.

For the next few days we didn’t go back to Queen Creek High, instead we left the house in the morning, waited for our parents to leave, then hung out by the pool getting drunk and stoned. But eventually we knew we’d have to make an appearance or the truancy officer was going to come to our house again. I still didn’t go to math or science, but I made it into English. Ms. Robinson looked at me with a smile when I entered and sat at my desk. *That’s odd*, I thought.

“Welcome to class everyone,” she began. “Since Autumn decided to join us today, I would like to start by having her read us her story.”

*What?* I thought. I could feel my cheeks burning with color, I immediately drew my eyes to the floor, *I can’t read it out loud!* But Ms. Robinson walked to my desk and laid a copy of my paper in front of me. Her head nod gestured me to “go ahead, it’ll be ok.” I began reading. My voice shook through the whole thing, but no one snickered, no one laughed, instead they just listened. They listened to what I had written and they seemed to like the tale of aliens, space ships, friends and being lost in the universe.

My body was weightless at the end of the day. An extra bounce bloomed in my step as I approached my sister’s car. She was waiting for me, smoking a cigarette.

“What’s up with you?” she asked.

Realizing the harassment I would receive from her if I told her, I didn’t say anything at all. Holding a rolled up copy of my story, I sat in the passenger seat. She started up the car, a flame shot out from the tailpipe, Ace of Base blasted from the terrible speakers, we were on our way.

The desert air was hot on our faces, my hair whipped in and out of the cab. I looked down at the rolled up paper in my hand and noticed on the back were words of red. I unrolled it to see a note from Ms. Robinson,

*Autumn, I thoroughly enjoyed your story. You have a lot of potential. I hope to see you in class.*

I smiled at the thought. I had potential.

My smiling face wandered to the open window to gaze at the open desert. We rolled to a stop sign, a chuckwalla sat sunning himself on a rock, a desert wren flew to the tip of a saguaro cactus, chickaree grew along the side of the road. I lazily stared out into a desert: open and full of life.